

Day of Rest

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*Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Text: Luke 6:1-16

Preach with the Bible in one and the newspaper in the other, they used to say. That's harder these days, since the news seems to be changing every hour. So I don't have much to say right here about the extraordinary events of the last two days. I'll just point out that today we read a conflict story that pits, on the one hand, Jesus, who's come to announce Jubilee, God's new beginning of freedom and healing that crosses boundaries of nationality and ethnicity; against the scribes and Pharisees, who want to use the Law to enforce those boundaries even at the cost of denying freedom and healing to others. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!

The conflict has to do with the Sabbath. Everything I know about Sabbath-keeping, I learned from my mother, when I was a kid living at home. On Sundays she didn't do meetings. On Sundays she didn't do semi-annual cleanup at church—though she was willing to pitch in the day before. But she did do worship and Bible study in the morning to restore her spirit. And in the afternoon, after church, she did do gardening at home—plunging her hands into the soft earth and nourishing the life that was growing there, as well as her own. And she did do floating in her inflatable boat on a nearby lake. And she understood the whole point of Sabbath, because she put a bumper sticker where she and the rest of us would see it, on the door leading out to the garage, the door that she had to pass through on the way to work, or picking up or dropping off us kids, or running errands. And that bumper sticker said, "Relax. God is in charge."

God is in charge, not us. When the newly freed people of Israel were wandering through the wilderness, totally dependent on God, eating the manna that God scattered around their camp every day, God commanded them *not* to collect manna on the Sabbath, but to trust that the manna gathered on the sixth day of the week would be enough to see them through. God is in charge, not you. Relax, rest, and trust that the world isn't going to come crashing down around you, because you were never in charge of it anyway. God loves it, God loves you, and God preserves and tends all the good things God has made.

But the Sabbath means other things as well. In the Law of Moses, it's clear that Sabbath rest is for everyone, not just those at the top of society. On the seventh day, it says, "you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns" (Exodus 20:10). In ancient times there were six days when slaves had to obey masters, when animals worked at tasks imposed by their owners, when women served men, but on the Sabbath everyone had an equal opportunity for rest. Sabbath is a day for freedom, a glimpse of what life in God's world would look like without the heavy burdens we carry on the other six days. The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life.

So understand that when Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees argue about the Sabbath, they're talking about something that is big, something whose meaning can't be distilled into a single sentence. Let me see if I can present Jesus' opponents' case in the

most charitable way I can. For them, Sabbath was about the identity of the Jewish people, whose existence was always under threat. They had survived slavery in Egypt, exile in Babylon, and persecution, 200 years before the time of Jesus, at the hands of a Greek king who banned the Torah, banned circumcision, banned Sabbath observance, banned the worship of YHWH, and did everything he could to stamp out the Jewish faith. Now they were occupied by the Romans, who were always testing their identity — “Can’t we just install this imperial eagle in the Jewish Temple?” the Romans would ask. “It’s no big deal. We do it everywhere in the empire.” And the Jews would take to the streets in protest the desecration of their sanctuary, until the Romans decided it wasn’t worth the trouble and backed down. When you feel your identity is under threat you want to hold on really strongly to the practices that make you special, that set you apart. If we’re going to survive as a people, these religious teachers might say, then we’re going to have to remember who we are and stick together.

I suspect that’s why they feel so strongly about Jesus and his disciples and the way they choose to observe the Sabbath. Jesus is building a successful movement, and they want to know whether he’s a good Jew. Does he wear a flag on his lapel? Does he put his hand over his heart during the national anthem? Is he going to stand with our people when the world is out to get us? That’s what I see going on in this story. It’s not that these people are control freaks who want everybody to keep the Sabbath their way. They’re people living with a lot of legitimate anxiety about their identity and their way of life with God.

Now, on the other side, let’s think about what Jesus brings to this argument. A couple of weeks ago we heard him preach at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth that he’s here to announce “the year of the Lord’s favor.” He’s drawing on the tradition of the Jubilee year from the Hebrew scriptures, a special time when debts are forgiven, slaves set free, and property returned to its ancestral owners. It’s a big reset button, and over time it came to be seen as a sign of God’s forgiveness, a new beginning, a fresh start. What does Sabbath look like in the Jubilee year, in the time of God’s favor? If Jesus is here to show us God’s new creation breaking into the world, how does that change the Sabbath?

We’ve got two episodes today of Jesus picking a fight with the scribes and Pharisees. In the first story, his disciples are making their way across a field of grain on the Sabbath, and as they go they pluck off the heads of grain, crush them in their hands to get at the edible part, and they eat. Eating on the Sabbath was not a problem—you have to eat! Even the Pharisees accepted that! The problem was the work they were doing, plucking and husking the grain. The Pharisees step in and question the disciples: “Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” (Don’t you love the way they frame that question? They’re not interested in a debate about what’s allowed—they’ve already presumed that they’re right.)

Jesus steps in to defend his friends, and he tells a story about King David, and how when he was on a military campaign, he seized the sacred bread kept in God’s sanctuary tent, in order to feed himself and his hungry troops. If anybody else had made a meal of the sacred bread, they would have been picking their teeth with one hand and knocking on the Pearly Gate with the other.¹ But because David was God’s anointed, God’s chosen ruler, the rules could be suspended in a time of necessity. Jesus claims that privilege for himself. He’s God’s anointed. “The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath,” he tells them. Just like a rock in the middle of a stream diverts the water, Jesus gets to bend and direct the way Sabbath is kept.

1 I can’t take credit for this colorful phrase, which is taken from Rancid Crabtree, one of the recurring characters in the short stories of the outdoorsman and author Patrick McManus.

But that just raises the question of *how* Jesus is going to shift Sabbath. In the next episode, on a different Sabbath day, Jesus sees a man with a withered and in the synagogue, and he knows that if he heals him, the scribes and Pharisees will hold it against him. So he puts a rhetorical question to them: Is the Sabbath a day for doing good or doing harm? Is it a day for saving or destroying life? He answers his own question when he heals the man's hand. The Sabbath, like the Jubilee, is a time to set people free, to forgive, to heal, to restore. Why should this man have to wait until tomorrow? Remember Jesus' first sermon, the one we heard a couple of weeks ago: *today* the scripture is fulfilled in your hearing, he said. *Today* is the Jubilee. *Now* is the day of salvation. This man is suffering now, and so Jesus, the herald of God's Jubilee, releases him from that suffering right now.

Sabbath is a gift from God. It means rest, release, freedom from weekday burdens. But we miss the mark when we claim that gift in a way that imposes burdens on others. We miss the mark when we see freedom as a zero-sum game, a gift we can enjoy only by denying it to others. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!

What will you do to take care of yourself today, to obey God's commandment to rest, and to do it in a way that's faithful to Jesus, that opens, rather than closes, doors for your neighbors; in a way that lightens burdens on the poor, the stranger, the sick? Sabbath is about knowing our limits, but also the possibilities in front of us. Healing, doing good is always allowed on the Sabbath. Will you spend time with someone who needs company? Do an act of service for the poor? Will you speak up for someone who can't speak up for themselves?

Jesus has told us why he's come. He brings good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. He's come to announce Jubilee. God's Sabbath is both gift and law. But Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, and in his presence Sabbath too needs to announce God's favor, God's new beginning. His question to the scribes and Pharisees is for you, for me, for all of us who carry Christ's name: is this a day to do good or to do harm, to save life or destroy it? Let anyone with ears to hear listen! Amen.